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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship between perceived communication competence and its importance in business organizations and the need for additional training of college business students in communication competencies. A survey was sent to all individuals who had indicated to a university center for management education and services an active interest in business or organizational training procedures or programs over the previous 5 years. One hundred eighty-five responses were received. Respondents were asked to indicate on a four-point scale the extent of competence of supervisor or management personnel in specific communication skills with subordinates, supervisors, and peers; the importance of those skills to supervisors or middle management personnel; and in which of the communication skills categories additional training was needed. The categories used were formal presentation, group problem solving, conference leadership, giving directions, handling grievances, private conferences, delegating authority, motivating people, and listening. The results indicated that listening, motivating people, and handling grievances were ranked as the top three areas in which additional training was needed. In general, supervisors or middle management personnel saw these three areas as being the most important to them regardless of with whom they are communicating. Listening and motivating people were the areas where on-the-job training should be concentrated, and where students should place the most emphasis before entering the business job market. (HTH)

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Communication Training Needs in Organizations:

A Competency/Proficiency Based Study

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Communication Training Needs in Organizations:

A Competency/Proficiency Based Study

Almost any attempt to analyze organizations, offices or personnel includes an investigation of the communication techniques that the potential employee will be needing and utilizing upon entering the work-place. Whether it be through job descriptions or actual on-the-job experience, persons within the organizations are actively aware of the importance of communication. The various practices that the individual will be asked to perform--from being effective during the initial interview to successfully supervising and managing others--all point to communication as being important. The fact that it may seem almost self-evident to indicate that communication is critical to an organization's and an individual's effectiveness only serves to emphasize the importance of actually discovering the areas of need for the person entering the job market, persons wishing to advance within the various organizations, and individuals who teach these two groups.

So pervasive is this intrisic awareness, in fact, that persons planning to enter into almost any occupation are well advised to assess their own communication abilities if they plan on being successful in the field they choose. As the economy progresses through the remainder of the 1980's, more and more of the positions available will be based on a service dominated economy with upwards of seventy percent of all jobs being centered on people dealing with people.[1] The way that employees deal with those individuals receiving these services, which is clearly a communication issue, becomes paramount to succeeding in whatever position an individual chooses.

The amount of time that employees presently spend in communication activities underscores the point. As early as 1964, a survey of industrial personnel indicated that first level supervisors spent seventy one percent of their time communicating with other individuals, second level managers spent eighty one percent of their time in the same activity, and third level managers eighty percent.[2]

Numerous other studies have reached similiar conclusions since 1964 regarding the importance of communication in the workplace. Klemmer and Snyder combined direct observation and questionnares for their 1972 study of the communication activities of over 2,600 persons in a research and development laboratory.[3] This combined technique, which was designed to check the estimates individuals might make of their own time spent communicating, revealed that the average individual spent from fifty to eighty percent of a typical workday communicating and that two-thirds of this communicating was talking and listening. Klemmer and Snyder's survey is important for it revealed that people tend to underestimate the amount of time they spend in oral communication in favor of writing and reading when asked to guage their own communication activities. The direct observation technique indicated that people actually engaged in a great deal more face-to-face communication than they realized. In another survey, over eighty percent of the managers identified communication as a major source of difficulty in their jobs.[4] In fact, "experts in management theory and human relations have been preaching the need for improved communication for nearly four decades."[5]

Given the awareness of a need for better communication skills, and the almost unlimited sub-topics that could be included in that need, several surveys have been conducted of persons actively working asking

them to identify what specific communication skills would be most useful to the college graduate entering the workplace. Three recent surveys are especially useful for ascertaining the communication needs of the college graduate. DiSalvo, Larsen and Seiler surveyed randomly selected graduates (1963-73) from the College of Business Adminstration at the University of Nebraska.[6] The survey revealed which speech communication areas that the University had traditionally taught had turned out to be most useful to these graduates. However, this survey did not ask the respondents to relate these skills to specific on-the-job needs. Instead, their study concentrated only on perceived importance of selected communication skills. No effort was made to examine the level of competence. Thus, it is impossible to determine from this study which communication skills are adequate and which need improvement. This information is obviously vital for designing training and development programs and curricula responsive to these needs.

Two years later, Hanna used similiar categories in a pilot study and determined that they were not sufficiently business based to be fully applicable to the realities of the organizational setting.[7] As a result of the pilot study, he revised the categories and surveyed the "Chief Executive Officer" of fifty-five companies in an effort to discover the "most troublesome" communication situations for managers, supervisors, and the labor force. He assumed from the results that the areas which were most troublesome should also be the areas where the training for college students should be emphasized. An equally plausible explanation, of course, would be that the areas that are most troublesome are also the ones where the skills are already used effectively. There is no reason to believe that the executives feel any need for additional

training simply because they see certain areas as creating difficulties.

This potential gap between the needs of employers and the training and background of college graduates was also addressed by Glassman and Farley who asked 223 businesspersons to identify areas in need of emphasis in business courses. Speaking and listening ranked quite high and the authors concluded: "Business wants students who know how to persuade, resolve conflict, be understood--in other words, deal with daily managerial problems."[8]

Competency/Proficiency Analysis

The importance of communication in organizations and businesses is substantiated from both the surveys of time spent by individuals in the process of communicating and studies of the perceived needs for the abilities encompassed in those communication skills. However, the areas unanswered by these studies include the relationship between the communication skills seen as important and those in need of further training.

As the review has indicated, prior studies have assumed that "importance" or "most troublesome" are synonymous with communication deficiencies. This study is designed to guage the correlation between competence and importance and the relation this correlation has to the actual need for further training. As indicated earlier, simply seeing a communication skill as important does not indicate that the individuals need any further training. If decisions are to be made regarding additional training in universities and on-the-job, the issue that must be answered is which skills are presently not well enough developed.

Two studies were conducted in order to answer the question of the relationship between perceived competence and importance and the need for additional training. The initial study, which functioned as a pilot for the one reported in detail in this paper, used the origional format

(ie. titles/labels/categories of communication skills) reported in the DeSalvo study to see if the assumptions made by the Hanna study were substantially correct. The assumption being that the traditional labels of speech communication are not easily translated into the needs of businesspersons. Based on the returns of thirty-seven questionaires from members of the Evansville Personnel Association, Thomlison[9] found that certain skills, such as listening, were easily identified as being in need of improvement, but that Hanna's conclusion concerning the problem with the transferability of labels was justified. This was revealed by both tabulated information and answers from open-ended questions.

Based on the pilot study, the present survey was devised that incorporated the results from the Thomlison survey and the two previous studies by DiSalvo and Hanna. The new survey was sent to all individuals who had indicated to the University of Evansville's Center for Management Education and Services an active interest in business or organizational training procedures or programs over the last five years (1976-1981). A total of 185 responses were received.

The questionarre requested respondents to judge the extent of competence of supervisors and/or middle management personnel in specific communication skills with subordinates, supervisors, and peers; the extent of importance of specific communication skills for supervisors and/or middle management personnel with subordinates, supervisors, and peers; and to check which of the communication skills categories needed additional training. In all three cases, respondents were asked to answer in relation to their own organization. The categories used, based on revisions from the pilot study, were: formal presentation, group problem solving,

conference leadership, giving directions, handling grievances, private (1-to-1) conferences, delegating authority, motivating people, and listening. In all three areas, the choice of other was also available. For the competence and importance questions, a zero to four scale was used to rate the extent of competence and importance of each category with each "target group" (ie. subordinates, superiors, and peers). The categories on the scale were labeled as follows: 0=Not at all; 1=To some extent; 2=To a moderate extent; 3=To a considerable extent; and 4=To a great extent. For the question regarding additional training, respondents were asked to check from the list "those areas which you feel need additional training in your organization." The category of other included an opportunity to explain that choice.

A computer assisted analysis was conducted on the returned questionnairer using the SSPS program.[10] Frequency tabulations, cross-tabulations, and weighted frequency tabulations were computed. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for a Paired Experiment was used for the 27 separate possibilities regarding the competence and importance rankings.[11] The model used to analyze which communication skills need improvement was as follows: Mean Rating for Importance minus Mean Rating for Competence equals Level of Training Need. The higher the differential, the greater the need for skill improvement and the more advisable communication training becomes.

Results

As Tables I, II and III indicate, listening, motivating people, and handling grievances were ranked as the top three areas where additional training appears to be needed. In general, supervisors and/or middle management personnel see these three areas as being the most important to them regardless of whether the communication is with subordinates, superiors, or peers.

INSERT TABLES I, II, & III

Table IV indicates the responses of the 185 individuals to the "areas which you feel need additional training in your organization." Interestingly, motivating people and listening rank substantially higher than any of the other categories. This result is especially important for the categories in the questionnaire were presented in the order of formal presentation, group problem solving, conference leadership, giving directions, handling grievances, private (1-to-1) conferences, delegating authority, motivating people, and listening. The over-whelming emphasis given to the categories of listening and motivating people would seem to be the two areas with the greatest need for additional training.

INSERT TABLE IV

Supervisor/Subordinates

Table I indicates the competence/importance differential for supervisor and/or middle management personnel with subordinates. Motivating people (1.639) and listening (1.607) are clearly ahead of the next three categories. Handling grievances (1.323) stands out as an area that was not indicated as one greatly in need in response to the general question (Table IV), but that is apparently a need that arises based on its importance to the role of supervisor and/or middle manager in relationship to subordinates. The closeness in ranking between delegating authority (1.181) and giving directions (.988) indicates that the combined activity that most supervisors engage in with subordinates is of substantial importance. Significantly, conference leadership (.495) and formal presentation (.110) receive little signifigance and Table IV substantiates that conclusion.

Supervisor/Superiors

Table II indicates the competence/importance differential for supervisors and/or middle management personnel with superiors. Listening (1.187) and motivating people (1.179) receive approximately the same

differential ranking and would both seem to be in need of additional training. Once again, Table IV substantiates these results. Handling grievances (.919) and private 1-to-1 conferences (.885) would indicate a possible correlation between these activities and certaintly indicates the method for training for this type of activity. Since the question was directed at communication with superiors, giving directions (.546), delegating authority (.501), and conference leadership (.456) naturally fall at the end of perceived need.

Supervisor/Peer

Table III indicates the competence/importance differential for supervisors and/or middle management personnel with peers. For this particular category, listening (1.264) and motivating people (1.148) are clearly the two areas most in need of additional training. Formal presentation (.104) falls well below all other categories which is probably a correct reflection for this grouping. Conference leadership (.397) is also very low and this can be seen as a logical reflection on the question.

Implications

From any one of the four perspectives that were addressed in the survey, listening and motivating people are clearly the areas where training on-the-job should be concentrated and where individuals planning on entering the job market should place the greatest emphasis when acquiring communication skills. These results are significant for the other choices do vary from supervisor to subordinate, supervisor to superior, or supervisor to peer and these variations are easily understood by the type of interaction that would normally take place between these groups. However, in all the categories of interaction, listening and motivating people was

chosen. Clearly then, training for individuals already actively working should begin with these two crucial areas.

The results also indicate which areas do not justify extensive training. Conference leadership ranked next to last or last in all four Tables. In all situations this particular skill either is already one that is known, or there simply is no great need for it. Formal presentation ranked last on two of the tables (supervisor/peer and supervisor/subordinate) and ranked sixth for supervisors/superiors. On table IV it fell cleanly into the lowest three areas in need of further training.

For the individual preparing for a career in business, these results indicate that the present skill level that they will attain in formal presentation and conference leadership is sufficient for the present needs. For those individuals designing curriculum for the pre-business and professional student, the implications are much greater. Numerous universities and colleges provide courses titled "Business and Professional Speaking." If the results of this survey are correct, this particular course might not be meeting the needs of the student. Curriculum planners should carefully examine the results indicated on the tables before deciding which courses should be offered to these students. The process of motivating people, for example, needs to be incorporated directly into the classwork of these students. Listening should be a primary course goal and perhaps a separate course. Finally, because of the variation between tables I, II, and III, after the first two categories are determined, courses should also be designed which address each of these categories and their particular needs.

This final implication for curriculum planners also applies to training and development personnel. Training, based on these results, must be tailored to the needs of each category.

Conclusion

This survey was an attempt to replicate and update past efforts to determine the areas most in need of communication training in businesses and organizations. The results indicate that listening and motivating people are the areas of over-riding need for additional training. Major questions regarding the present curriculum for college and university students should be raised as a result of this information. For the programs that presently exist within the various businesses and organizations, this survey should either affirm the present direction or provide additional insights into the training needs.

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[11]The Results of the Wilcoxon Test indicated that the two categories were not identical. Applicaton procedures taken from: Morris Hamburg, Stastical Analysis for Decision Making, 2nd Ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1977).

TABLE I

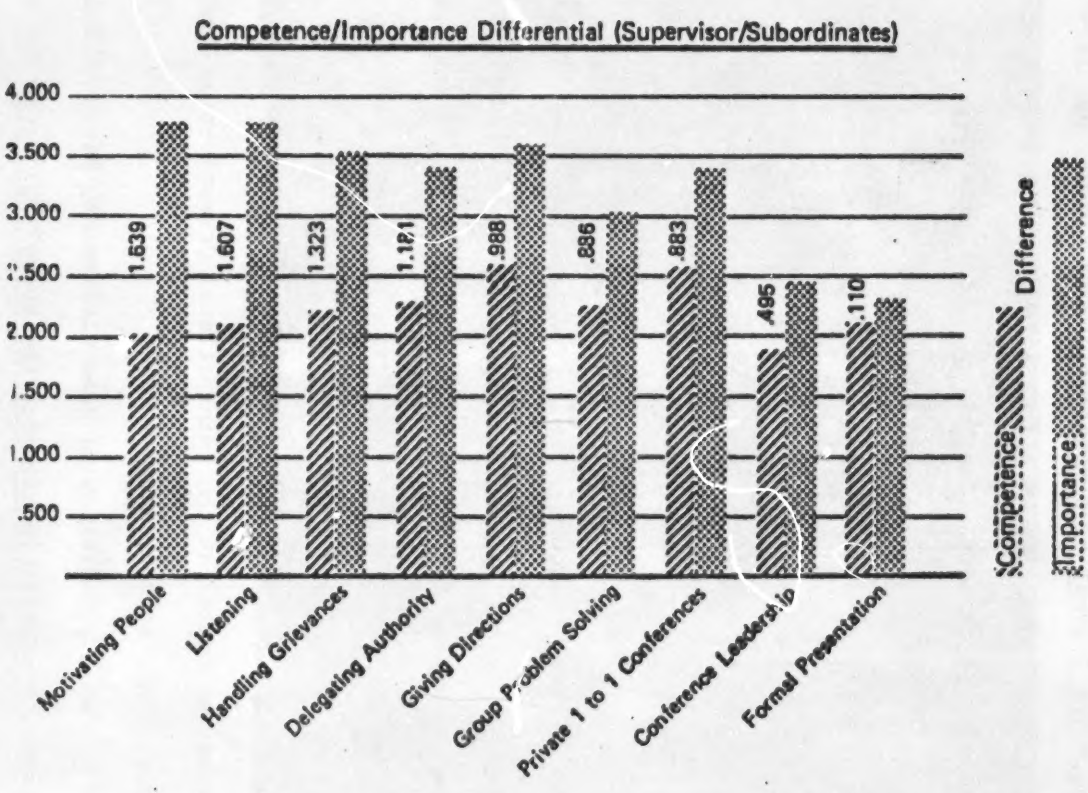

Competence/Importance Differential (Supervisor/Subordinates)
4.000
3.500
3.000
2.500
2.000
1.500
1.000
.500
1.539
1.607
1.323
1.121
.988
.886
.883
.495
.110
Motivating People
Listening
Handling Grievances
Delegating Authority
Giving Directions
Group Problem Solving
Private 1 to 1 Conferences
Conference Leadership
Formal Presentation
Difference
Competence
Importance

TABLE II

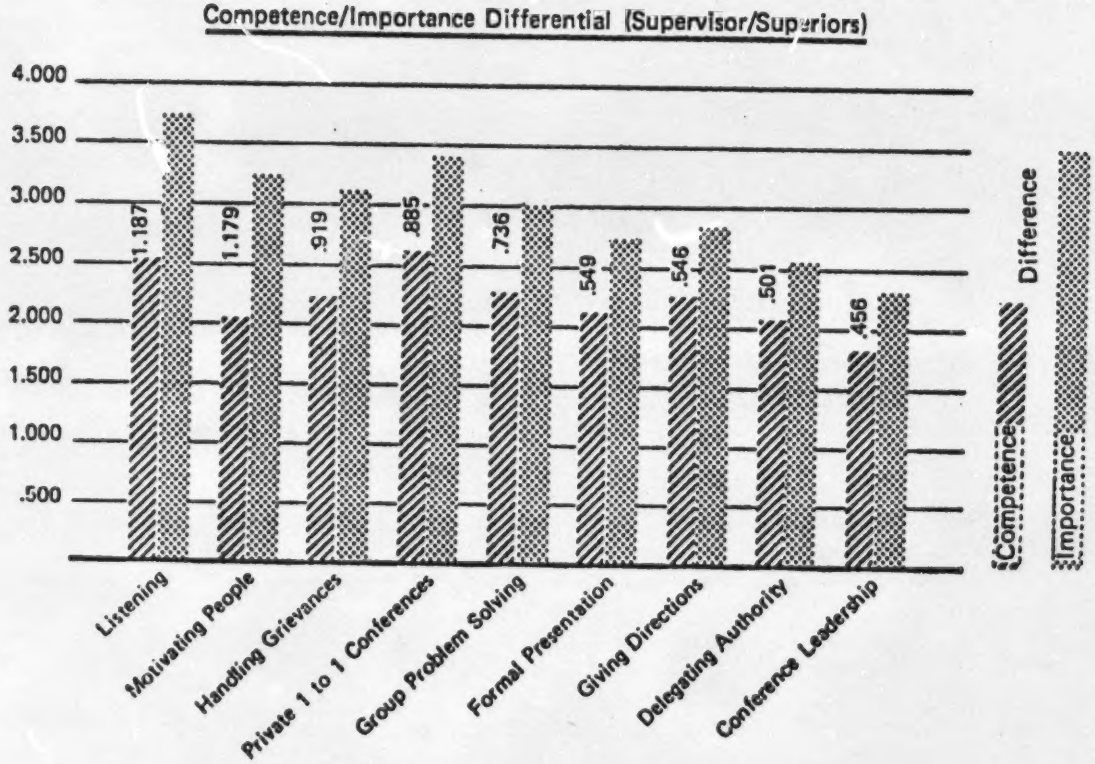

Competence/Importance Differential (Supervisor/Superiors)
4.000
3.500
3.000
2.500
2.000
1.500
1.000
.500
1.187
1.179
.919
.885
.736
.549
.546
.501
.456
Listening
Motivating People
Handling Grievances
Private 1 to 1 Conferences
Group Problem Solving
Formal Presentation
Giving Directions
Delegating Authority
Conference Leadership
Competence
Difference
Importance

TABLE III

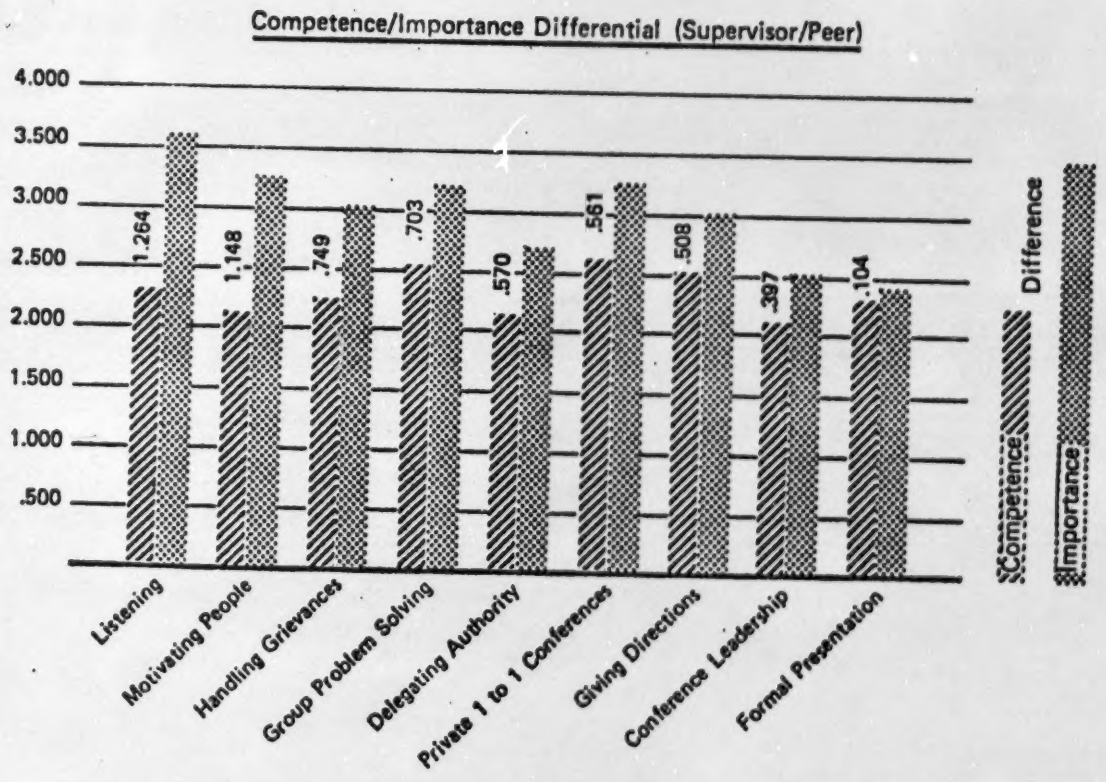
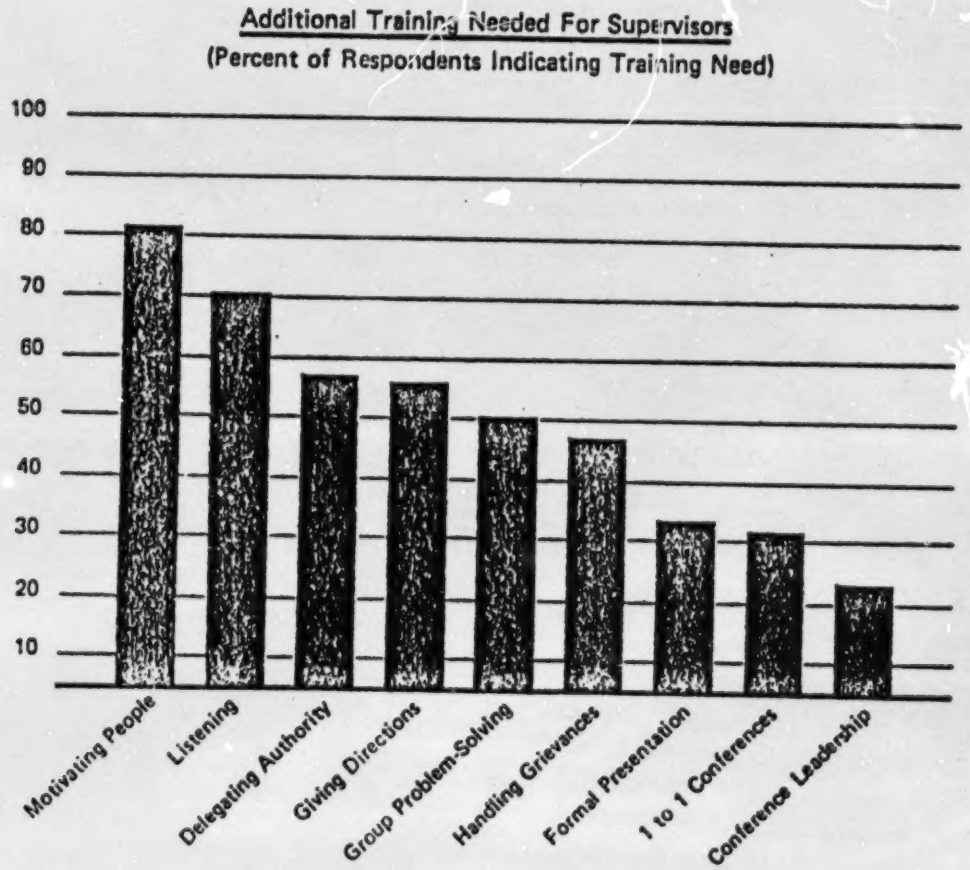

Competence/Importance Differential (Supervisor/Peer)
4.000
3.500
3.000
2.500
2.000
1.500
1.000
.500
1.264
1.148
.749
.703
.570
.561
.508
.397
.104
Listening
Motivating People
Handling Grievances
Group Problem Solving
Delegating Authority
Private 1 to 1 Conferences
Giving Directions
Conference Leadership
Formal Presentation
Competence
Difference
Importance

TABLE IV


Additional Training Needed For Supervisors
(Percent of Respondents Indicating Training Need)
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
Motivating People
Listening
Delegating Authority
Giving Directions
Group Problem-Solving
Handling Grievances
Formal Presentation
1 to 1 Conferences
Conference Leadership